



## **Presentation by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at the Budapest Forum for Christian Communicators**

*Taking part in the Budapest Forum for Christian Communicators held in Budapest, Hungary, on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019, were high-ranking representatives of the Local Orthodox Churches, Roman Catholic Church and Protestant communities, as well as Hungarian statesmen and public figures. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, was one of the keynote speakers, delivering a presentation on Christianity in Today's World.*

Dear participants in the Forum,

I am pleased to greet Christian journalists who have gathered today in the Hungarian capital to discuss the topical issues of their profession. It is a joy for me to be here on the Hungarian soil, since I was the administrator of the diocese of Budapest and Hungary for six years. On numerous occasions I visited various cities and towns in Hungary, and I know the country and its remarkable people well.

Today's meeting poses a question to us: what are the differences between a Christian journalist and any other journalist? And if there are differences, do they influence the content of news articles and feature materials? The Christian journalist's work is a part of the ministry of the Church in today's world. Believers, working in the mass media, are called to be preachers of Christ Jesus and His Gospel teaching. To bear witness to the Gospel before the world around them is the task for those working in the field of Christian journalism.

To speak honestly about the problems that concern people, the Christian journalists themselves must be honest. Moreover, they are called to realize the Christian moral ideals in their profession. For it is impossible to write sincerely about the values of Christian family, of families with many children, of love and selflessness of spouses, while being unwilling to live in accord with these values. One cannot testify to the tragedy of persecution of Christians in various regions of the world while being unable to take this pain to heart. In their work the believing journalists are called upon to flee from hypocrisy, deception, juggling with the facts, tendentiousness and bias.

When I accepted this invitation to the Forum for Christian Communicators, I gave thought to the influence that the mass media has upon the formation of contemporary peoples' worldviews and their

system of values. “In our day journalists are people who have enormous possibilities for extending their influence because they have at their disposal... totally unique informational opportunities,” said His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia at a similar forum in Moscow.[1]

The life of our contemporaries is characterized by a powerful integration into the information space and communications infrastructure. Thanks to the development of technology people now find themselves on the crest of a news wave with minimal effort expended – it is enough to pick up one’s cell phone to access news, analysis and expert opinion on the most burning issues of the day from anywhere on the planet. Today we witness the birth of new formats and genres of journalism – video blogs, social networking groups and messenger channels – which are rapidly becoming popular.

People today are transferring their attention away from the traditional vehicles of information to the sphere of the Internet and its technology. This development of media infrastructure contains within itself missionary possibilities. And this is why the Church actively uses the same means as modern-day journalists to carry out her mission, preach the word of God and protect traditional Christian values.

In Russia, apart from the official church media, there are large-scale Orthodox informational and analytical web portals, there are popular video bloggers from among the clergy and the laity, and social networks and messengers are actively used for the work of theme groups. The traditional Orthodox mass media is also widely represented in the information space – there are Orthodox TV channels which broadcast in the digital and satellite networks, there are religious programmes on secular TV channels, printed editions and Orthodox radio stations. However, if of course we are to calculate the amount of air time given over to Orthodox topics within the context of the general volume of broadcasting on radio or television, we see that it is quite modest.

The mass media can play various socio-political roles by both being a unifying, enlightening and peace-making force in society, as well as by being a destructive and inflammatory force inciting enmity and hatred. Unfortunately, modern-day tendencies show that journalism can be easily transformed into a weapon for the manipulation of human consciousness. Today we Christians of both West and East are confronted by many challenges and problems which our conscience has to respond to. “The power of the word is stronger than the power of money or arms. All that has happened in history, all great transformations began with the word ... The word contains within itself the potential for salvation and the potential for ruin, and the past twentieth century illustrated in an astonishing way the power of the word,” His Holiness Patriarch Kirill emphasizes.[2]

The average person today mainly believes that which he/she reads in print or in the electronic media, or sees on television. A script read aloud in authoritative tones on television accompanied by a video footage has no need of proof. It is not the conclusions that convince but the reader’s intonation and

pictures on the screen.

The paradox of the modern-day world is that in an apparent surfeit of information, people and society as a whole are in receipt of less concrete, evidential and proven information and become ever more victims of mythologization and manipulation. It is these devices which are often used by new so-called religious organizations and fundamentalists for whom the recruiting of new followers is the primary objective. We mean here totalitarian sect

It is within this new reality, when the volume of news reports overwhelms the consumer of information and he/she has no time to check their veracity, that 'fake news' is more often used. The technology of creating fake news is varied but, as a rule, by applying the discernment approach it is possible to recognize a fake. The problem is that people today, weighed down by the cares of their day-to-day lives, lack time to analyze the information they get and to determine what is true and what is a lie.

It is no secret that falsehood is always used in information wars. And today an information war has been unleashed on Christianity, it is waged against both the foundations of the faith and the Churches, as well as against their representatives. What means is the Christian journalist to deploy in this war? It is essential not to borrow the means of certain secular periodicals. When touching upon burning issues, it is important not to resort to blackening and condemnation; not to sow discord among pastors and the faithful on the one hand and the secular world on the other, between faith and science, between the Church and the state. We must recall the words of the Lord which can be applied to the profession of journalism: "I tell, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12:36-37).

One of the 'proven' tactics of information warfare is to throw a veil over inconvenient topics. There is much injustice, untruth, violence, oppression and humiliation in today's world. It is obvious that a journalist is not able to cope with all this; yet, he/she can draw people's attention to what is happening. We know of numerous examples when it was the investigative journalism that drew the attention of a cumbersome state or international bureaucratic machine to certain crimes. To do that, Christian will and courage are needed.

A problem which in recent decades has become truly global is the persecution of Christians in many countries of the world. Until recently this problem has not received due attention among the international mass media. For many years the Western press and Western leaders passed it over in silence. As a result of the events of the 'Arab Spring' the Middle East has been engulfed in a conflagration. The lives of millions of Christians who lived in the region since the first centuries of Christianity have been under threat.

The scale of the persecution of Christians and Christianity has become catastrophic throughout the world. According to the data by various international organizations, at present around one hundred million followers of the teaching of Jesus Christ are subjected to persecution in various countries throughout the world. It is essential to recognize the obvious fact that Christians are the most persecuted religious community on the planet.

In a number of countries of the Middle East all religion apart from Islam is prohibited. Secret Christians are forced into hiding so that they are not executed. In some countries the Christian population is rapidly declining. While 15 years ago there lived one and a half million Christians in Iraq, left there now are hardly one hundred fifty thousand.

Libya remains an extremely dangerous place for Christians after it had been plunged into chaos following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi.

Pakistan is a country noted for the application of its notorious law on blasphemy. Local Christians live in fear of this law, being a group which is systematically persecuted and discriminated against, and least protected. They suffer not only at the hands of the state but also at the hands of radical groups.

In Somalia from year to year Christians are declared to be apostates and their destruction is considered almost to be a matter of honour. At present more than ninety-nine percent of Somalians are Muslims. Christianity is professed by the Bantu, one of the minority peoples of Somalia. For centuries they have been subjected to persecution and treated as second-class citizens. The Bantu have been excluded from the life of society, deprived of political rights and cannot receive an education. Gunmen from such groups as Al-Shabab hunt down Christians who have converted from Islam.

An important result of joint work by the Christian churches and countries was the Statement Supporting the Human Rights of Christians and Other Communities, Particularly in the Middle East, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

The meeting between the Primes of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Havana in 2016 has had historic importance. As a result of the joint statement signed by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, which had as its main topic the issue of persecuted Christians, the subject of the genocide of Christians finally began to be discussed at many authoritative media forums and became part of the international agenda.

A joint declaration in defense of persecuted Christians was signed also at a meeting between His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in November 2017. The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, together with the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church,

His Holiness Patriarch Abune Mathias I, issued a similar communique during the latter's visit to Moscow in May 2018.

Yet it is not only words and statements that are our reaction to the calamitous plight of Christians. In recent years the Moscow Patriarchate, together with Russia's Christian and Muslim communities, has on numerous occasions sent humanitarian aid to the Middle East. In April 2017, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, there was set up an interreligious working group for rendering humanitarian aid to the population of Syria, made up of both Russian Christians and Muslims.

The Russian Church appreciates greatly the position of the Hungarian government on the issue of the protection of and real aid to the Christians of the Middle East. Hungary implements a special programme entitled 'Hungary Helps' with the aim of rendering aid to Christians persecuted in Africa and the Middle East. The director of the programme states that "Help should be provided where the trouble lies instead of bringing the trouble to Europe."**[3]**

Hungary is one of the countries which have repeatedly drawn the European Union's attention to the aggression enacted against the Copts in Egypt on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011. Under Hungary's presidency of the European Union the EU Committee of Ministers entrusted Catherine Ashton, high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, to report on the measures which the EU has undertaken for the protection of the freedom of religion. Among the documents adopted we must mention the resolution of the European Parliament of 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of religious freedom and the analogous resolution by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Christian journalists are called upon to openly testify to the position and work of national governments and international institutions aimed at the vindication of the right of Christians to a peaceful life and the free confession of their faith.

Today, an outrageous example of media pressure upon the life of the Church and Christians, of the stirring up of hatred on the grounds of national and religious identity are the events which recently took place in Ukraine under the former President Petro Poroshenko, when the state authorities launched an attack on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and crudely interfered in her internal affairs.

In January 2019, at the urgent request of Mr. Poroshenko and contrary to the will of the majority of the Orthodox population of Ukraine, the Patriarch of Constantinople presented the Tomos of autocephaly to a pseudo-church structure created at the initiative of the secular authorities by means of uniting two schismatic groups. The new ecclesiastical structure has not been recognized by any of the Local Orthodox Churches, apart from the Church of Constantinople. Yet its creation has become the reason

for increasing pressure upon the bishops, clergy and faithful of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. With the encouragement and support of the authorities of the time, this structure – the so-called ‘Orthodox church of Ukraine’ (OCU) – launched a campaign of seizures of churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The majority of the seizures occurred in Western Ukraine in the territories of the regions of Volyn, Rovno and Zhitomir. There is information that eighty-three parishes have been taken over by the newly-formed structure. This figure does not include the numerous instances of the illegal reregistration of our communities as communities of the schismatics by the efforts of the local authorities.

The scenario for these attacks in all instances is the same – unknown persons, often inhabitants of neighbouring regions, are bussed in, break the locks of the church building and take it under their control. Among the raiders are people in camouflage. It is not easy to counteract these seizures – they are coordinated by local officials, and law enforcement officials who are called out do nothing.

Bishop Viktor of Baryshevka, representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to the European international organizations, has testified that “these processes are controlled by representatives of the state or local authorities. If the authorities did not have the oversight of the seizure of churches and their subsequent illegal reregistration as the OCU parishes, then these seizures most certainly would not have taken place. Unfortunately, the activists and raiders are controlled by the chairmen of rural councils, deputies of district and regional councils and local businessmen. In the majority of cases churches are seized by people who have been brought in and the ‘extras’ are made up of members of a territorial community who do not and never will attend the local church.”**[4]**

The fact itself of the seizure of churches is indicative to the utmost degree of the hatred, enmity and distrust among people. And this is the saddest thing that can happen among Christians. How will people continue to live in the same village where they have been divided into two camps, where people have been beaten up or driven out, where blood has been spilled, where people have been humiliated and disgraced? It is easy to find online video footage of these revolting attacks which are accompanied by assaults upon parishioners and clergy of the Ukrainian Church, in which local officials and deputies take part with the total connivance of the local police.

The Commission of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which observed the situation in Ukraine from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018 to 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019, documented numerous instances of threats and acts of intimidation against clergy and parishioners, mainly belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The commission has stated that the existing political environment enables even greater tension which negatively affects freedom of religion and beliefs. The report speaks about searches on the premises of the Ukrainian Church and the premises of her bishops who were accused of instigating religious enmity.

The document, inter alia, recommends that the Ukrainian government fulfills its international obligations in the sphere of human rights, to wit: to undertake effective measures so that no one is discriminated against by state institutions, groups or individuals on the grounds of their religion or beliefs.[5]

The mass media, controlled by the Ukrainian authorities, has supported the latter's church policies over the past five years. They have stirred up hatred against the clergy and parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, spread shameless lies and have engaged in manipulation by producing staged provocative reports with the aim of stirring up hatred on religious grounds. We well remember the way the annual procession of the cross on the Feast Day of the Baptism of Russia was reported. Journalists, news reporters and state officials went on air every year to insult the clergy and faithful of the Ukrainian Church, threatening them with reprisals.[6]

There was set up under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine a website called 'Myrotvorets' (lit. Peacemaker), which publishes the personal data of people who, according to the creators of the site, are enemies of Ukraine. Among the latter were bishops and clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church, and that merely for the fact that they defend the rights of the canonical Church in Ukraine.

Those journalists who have been determined to make public the real facts when reporting on religious life in Ukraine risk incurring the might of the state machine. Last year Ukraine was included for the first time in the list of countries where journalists are imprisoned for their professional activities. According to the data by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Ukraine is on the list alongside such countries as Algiers, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Guatemala, Iraq, Morocco, Niger, Pakistan, the Republic of Congo, Somalia and Uganda.[7]

We see by the example of Ukraine how the once cradle of eastern Christianity in the Slavic lands has become a place of persecution of the Church of the majority by the state and people who also call themselves Christians. I express hope that Ukraine's new President Volodymyr Zelensky and the newly elected Supreme Rada will put an end to the lawlessness and will not interfere in church affairs.

Christianity and modern-day European identity is a topic that cannot be avoided today. It is fundamental, as it is identity which imparts values to a particular social community. Much has already been said at various international forums and conferences about the crisis of European identity and the ousting of Christians to the margin of European public life. As we know from the laws of physics, gas fills up the space that it is released into. Secularism, like a gas, fills up the public expanse that it has access to, expelling from it the Christian worldview as alien to it. And the key to this 'gas valve' is to be found in the hands of the political leadership of the European Union.

At the same time, within Europe there are countries which speak from the position of the Christian identity of their people, unafraid to declare their historical Christian roots. And here I would like to cite Hungary as an example.

The new constitution which the Hungarian Parliament adopted in 2012 caused protest at international level. The European Commission and other EU institutions criticized the new fundamental law of Hungary, accusing the country's leadership of curtailing democracy.<sup>[8]</sup> Under attack too were the constitution's provisions pertaining to the basic Christian values. For example, the constitution's preamble speaks about Hungary's civilizational choice and Christian heritage: "We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago ... We recognize the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood. We value the various religious traditions of our country."<sup>[9]</sup> What a remarkable difference with the document which did not happen but which was to become the constitution of the European Union. When the document was being worked upon, both Christian tradition and the Christian heritage of the peoples of the continent were removed from the preamble for ideological reasons.

The modern-day public space of Europe is developing in such a way as if there is no such a thing as Christianity: Christian churches are denied the right to a public assessment of social processes and events, their symbols are removed from streets and squares, while the names of church holidays are altered beyond recognition. Thus, Christmas has long been called a season feast. Every year human rights and monitoring organizations document instances of discrimination against Christians by the state for acts which are determined by their faith.

Europe has in effect been taken over by a wave of violence in relation to its core religion. And all of this is happening against the background of an unceasing influx of refugees, predominantly from African and Middle Eastern Muslim countries. These processes will inevitably entail a transformation of the religious and ethnic landscape of Europe, made ever more acute by the fact that the native population of the continent is inexorably declining.

It ought to be remembered that a significant part of the influx of migrants is not only caused by civil wars but is a result of powerful economic stratification and poverty.

The problem of social and economic inequality is one of the most pressing and at the same time one of the most complex problems of the modern-day world. Millions of people on our planet eke out a pitiful existence, suffering from malnutrition, disease, various forms of discrimination and the consequences of the harm caused to the environment. All of these problems become ever more acute as the world economy and technological growth become globalized. Globalization creates advantages for a small number of people and risks for a huge part of the earth's population. Economists admit that the opening



of markets in developing countries has in the main benefited the wealthy countries and has brought about an increase, and not a reduction, of the gap between the wealthy and the poor countries.

The overriding principle of modern-day economic culture is profiteering, the resolution of one's objectives and the realization of one's interests at the expense of others. Humanistic values, which have at their basis Christian roots, have been devalued. An economy built on the cultivation of the principle of hedonism is by definition immoral. Immoral too is the humankind's rapacious attitude towards the natural environment, which suffers from the insatiable appetite of a man of the consumer world.

We must remember that material benefits by themselves do not make us happy; moreover, concentration solely upon material well-being leads to the moral degradation of the human person. Christ warns us: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15). The Church calls upon us to treat wealth as God's gift which is given to the humans not so much as for themselves but for the benefit of their neighbours. Those who obtain profit should be made aware that a great responsibility rests upon them – to be attentive to the needs of other people, to help eradicate economic injustice in society and thus fulfill the will of God.

In coming to the end of my presentation, I would like once more to return to the topic of Christian journalism. Here today are present many representatives of the mass media who work in various genres and directions. You have different employers; you depend on the editorial policy of your periodicals and the preferences of media owners. But we who consider ourselves to be followers of Christ cannot betray our Christian conscience. Both in the history of Christianity and in contemporary history we can find many examples of Christian courage, when people refused to do something that goes against God's commandments and their understanding of fidelity to Christ. These examples are to inspire us and lead us to an awareness that we are not alone but that Christ is with us. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30).

I thank you for your attention.

**[1]** Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the I International Forum of Communicators "MediaPost" at the Russian State Humanitarian University. <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5032585.html>

**[2]** Ibid.

**[3]** Orbán deploys Christianity with a twist to tighten grip in Hungary

**<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/viktor-orban-budapest-hungary-christianity-with-a-twist>**

**[4]** 'The first crisis of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Why the seizure of churches has come to nothing and those and seized churches stand empty' (in Russian).

**<https://strana.ua/articles/194412-zakhvaty-khramov-upts-ushli-na-spad-a-otzhatye-tserkvi-ptsu-pustujut.html>**

**[5]** UN calls upon Ukrainian leadership to guarantee freedom of religion in the country (in Russian).

**<https://www.pravmir.ru/v-oon-prizvali-rukovodstvo-ukrainy-obespechit-religioznuyu-svobodu-v-strane/>**

**[6]** Day of Rus Baptism: Great Cross Procession and dissenters without administrative resource

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sX-qgyPtF1I&feature=youtu.be>**

**[7]** The authorities against the media: journalists in Ukraine replaced by propagandists and populists from quarter no. 95 (in Russian). **<https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20181026/1021566267.html>**

**[8]** Criticism of Hungary's new constitution continues (in Russian).

**<https://ru.euronews.com/2012/01/03/eu-warns-hungary-on-aid-study-visit>**

**[9]** **[https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Hungary\\_2011.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Hungary_2011.pdf)**

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